

## Talk on “Excellence in Think Tanks”

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Venue: CSTEP

Dr Ajay Mathur, Director General, The Energy Research Institute (TERI) and Board Member of CSTEP, delivered a talk about the role played by think tanks in policy formulation and how they can be relevant in order to achieve excellence. Bring everybody on board, was his message to think tanks working on policy changes. A brief write up of the Talk has been provided below.

### **Create a better place, one policy change at a time:**

Think tanks carry out policy analysis, engage with policy makers and through policy actions create a change in society. The ultimate objective is the belief that we can create a better place, improve quality of life and we provide different policy options to get there.

Think tanks come in all shapes and sizes- Some, like CPR, focus only on policy, others, like TERI, work on policy and implementation on the field and others are activist Think Tanks, whose objective is to impact policy. As long as there is an element of impacting policy, they can be considered a think tank. Today, there are academic institutions that are setting up policy study centres or units. Although their rewards are different (focus is on training students, the academic calendar and on publishing papers), they are important as well.

What works for one think tank may not work for another.

What should we excel in?

For think tanks, excellence in both analysis and engagement is crucial.

How to be excellent?

### **Stay Relevant**

The key challenge for any think tank is relevance- whatever be the policy. And in order to be relevant, it is important that we interact with all kinds of stakeholders- both people who are going to benefit from the policy change and the people who are going to be doomed.

Dr Ajay Mathur gave an example of how the Department of New Energy Sources (now the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy) began and how today, RE and manufacturers in this sector are a force to reckon with. Considering that India is a developing country, the opportunities it presents are so vast, that it is possible to make ourselves relevant. “We can create a situation of interest because if something is not interesting, it is not picked up. This is a part of excellence: being relevant today, even if your policy is for the future,” he said.

### **Do Good Analysis**

Identify the correct question, make sure that methodology and data come together and if there are uncertainties, make them a part of the analysis as well.

Consider feasibility when making an analysis or policy recommendation. While economic feasibility is one part, political feasibility (for lack of a better word) is important. ‘Gather enough constituencies of stakeholders- all stakeholders- and work with them. Bring them on board,’ he said.

While developing appropriate methodology, an important aspect to consider is the effectiveness of options. There are no generalised criteria to determine effectiveness of options and so every researcher has to do this for herself. "Determine for yourself the effectiveness of options from the point of view of impact and implementability. Sometimes, the second best solution is more effective," he said.

In order to be excellent, researchers should also keep in mind the diversity of a developing country such as India. "Consider income, diversity in the use of technology and capability of people to adopt. In diverse, developing countries, averages don't work," he said.

While researchers may know the problem and the end point, they often don't know the pathway to get there. Who knows? Politicians and bureaucrats; learn from them, he said.

He mentioned the example of LEDs which started at Rs 500 per bulb. But through a series of steps that built on itself, the price was brought down to Rs 38 per bulb. Successful early adoption will mean larger adoption.

### **Measuring impact:**

Researchers should think about how we are going to measure impact. Use technology, which can help measure real time impact, he said.

### **TOOLS:**

"We [think tanks] do what we do mainly through institutional analysis and through modelling. But what is important is that we convince ourselves first, then others," Dr Mathur said.

Policy changes have been identified to take place (generally) in four types: through subsidies or grants, taxation, regulation and creating institutions or business models (eg. EESL).

However, with regard to policy interventions, our analytical models are poor in assessment.

"Create models that answer how policy interventions can be done," he said, explaining that this is where multi-institutional cooperation comes in: it helps in moving policy forward.

Another method is to do a large enough pilot which gives researchers the ability to convince policy makers better.

Outreach is crucial for excellence, he added. It is not enough to remain in reports but to push ahead with various stakeholders by working with them. "When policy makers hear the same kind of message from different sources, it reinforces the message, he said, stressing again on the importance of multi-institutional cooperation."

### **What do we do internally?**

Financial stability is important and in order to raise funds we need to raise the profile of the organisation. "CSTEP has earned the trust and confidence of stakeholders. Working together with various stakeholders can enhance excellence," he said.

We can ensure quality control by having outside people who look in. TERI has a cadre of distinguished fellows for mentoring and quality control. They also help open doors to people in academics and policy makers- improve access.